

**Statement of the Ann Arbor / Ypsilanti Regional Chamber regarding the proposed merger of Ypsilanti Public Schools and Willow Run Community Schools**

**July 19, 2012**

The Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti (A2Y) Regional Chamber supports the proposed merger of Ypsilanti Public Schools (YPS) and Willow Run Community Schools (WRCS). This merger aligns with the A2Y Chamber's longstanding advocacy of innovative cooperation, collaboration or consolidation between governmental units whenever and wherever appropriate, especially when such actions have community support.

The merger of these districts represents a unique opportunity to create a new educational system designed to meet the needs of students, in partnership with their parents, from birth through postsecondary education. In essence, by forming a new district the community can create a new way to deliver education in a manner better addressing the needs of the students. Both public and private assessments of the districts reveal two systems currently struggling with similar challenges, including declining enrollment, severe operational deficits, and low academic achievement. By coming together, these separate but bordering school systems have the ability to implement programs and services that are based on solid research and have been proven to increase achievement for all students. With this consolidation the communities will also be able to retain local control over the curriculum and finances, and likely avoid the appointment of an emergency financial manager who would otherwise assume that control. In addition, consolidation will create economies of scale, and eliminate redundancies which are inherent, but avoidable, when two relatively small contiguous systems operate separately.

This merger is especially important given the consequences of inaction. Should YPS and WRCS decide not to merge, both could face dire consequences in the form of short-term cuts and ultimately loss of local control. Conversely, the State is offering incentives to consolidate (including a line item in the School Aid budget of \$10 million to support consolidation of districts and shared services). The State Superintendent of Instruction also pledged his support in this effort and likely will provide more time for the operational debt to be paid. An extended repayment period of the accumulated debt (the State currently expects deficits to be eliminated in a two-year period) will allow the new district to avoid massive cuts to staffing and programs enabling a new system that is financially viable and designed for improved achievement for all students.

In sum, this merger could ultimately provide a better educational experience for our children, save jobs of valued educators, and serve as an example of how two organizations can combine forces and build upon their collective strengths. While the circumstances underlying this opportunity are regrettable, we believe that there are significant benefits achievable for the students if this opportunity is seized at this time. We therefore urge each board of education to move forward with putting the question of consolidation on the ballot for voters in November.